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**Office of Program Resources Management**

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***September 26, 2005***

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### **STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE #4**

**(Management of Productive, Life-Sustaining Natural Resources Strengthened)**

#### **Getting things done the old fashion way**

*By Edwin G. Espejo*

**(Source: SunStar General Santos City Internet Online – 9/26/05)**

WITH no end in sight in the country's energy woes, the solution could just well be found high up the foothills of Alif Mountain Ranges in Columbio, Sultan Kudarat.

In the hamlet (sitio) of Lam-alis, a village in Datal Blao, more than 86 households are already "energized" and finally enjoying bright evenings for the first time in decades.

Thanks to a mini-hydro plant put into operational early this year largely through the efforts of the residents and the people behind the Alliance of Mindanao Off-Grid Renewable Program (Amore).

Capable of producing up to 12-kilowatt electricity, the mini-hydro plant funded by the United States Agency for International Development (Usaid) is cost-efficient and comes in cheap.

For where in the county today could you find electricity at P100 per month for two 40-watt florescent tubes or incandescent bulbs and additional P25 per household appliance?

And mind you, this power plant is environment-friendly and virtually inexhaustible, except when the turbine engine finally conks up. But that is at least 25 years from now, according to Amore project manager Recto Doctor.

The said power plant is also capable of revving up an integrated agri-mill that can mill three to four bags of corn, coffee, and palay per hour.

These twin infrastructures alone have already brought tremendous benefits to the residents of Lam-alis, home to the indigenous B'laan tribe and once a fierce battleground between the New People's Army (NPA) and government forces.

### **Change for the better**

Municipal tribal chieftain Agustin Dabi says they no longer have to trek several kilometers to mill their produce. And with improved road network, they are now assured of better prices.

But he also hastens to add that there are still several concerns that need to be addressed. For one, he explained, the residents--some 106-household strong--needs more educational assistance, livelihood projects, and working animals.

The 59-year-old chieftain also said protecting the watershed that provided the needed water supply to the turbine that runs the power plant has also become a primordial concern for the community.

But, in general, Columbio Mayor Edwin Bermudez said he was overwhelmed by the community's successes.

"I hope this would serve as model for tribal communities in my town," he said during the formal turnover of the twin projects to the Lam-alis Christian-B'laan Renewable Energy Association (LCREA) held last week.

"Now, they have safe water, electricity, good education and communication facilities," he said referring to the calling center set up by Smart Communication.

Yes, making calls through mobile phone units has become a reality in this poverty-stricken and conflict-ravaged hamlet.

Early this year, IBM also donated a computer for school graders and provided the training for teachers for its efficient use.

Amore also found "leverage fund" for the construction of a potable water system. All the residents have to pay for this precious supply is P10 per household per month.

### **Mandate**

Amore has been organizing communities and "leveraging" funds for the "hardware" that are needed to power up far-flung communities in Mindanao.

All of these communities are right in the middle of armed conflict between armed rebels of all persuasion and the government.

Lam-alis is only one of tens of communities (the others are in Tawi-Tawi, Basilan, Maguindanao and Palawan) that are serviced by Amore.

With Usaid and the British Embassy providing generous support, one wonders if the project is not being used as instrument to eavesdrop on rebel activities.

Doctor begs to disagree but he admits they hope that with the development efforts, they will be able to convince the rebels "to return to the folds of the law".

So far, he revealed, they have yet to meet violent resistance from rebel groups present in their areas.

In Lam-alis, for example, he said communist-led NPA rebels have reportedly been asking people in the community about the project.

Although Doctor hastened to add they have not made direct contact with the NPAs, they have been told that the rebels have so far opted to lay off their hands from Amore personnel and the project itself.

Bermudez also said the rebels have no reason to oppose the project.

(Lam-alis was scene to a fierce running gunbattle between the NPA rebels and government soldiers in February this year. Two members of the Army's 27th Infantry Battalion were wounded when the rebels detonated a landmine on soldiers on foot patrol)

For Amore personnel, however, these occurrences will not deter them from implementing their "mandate"--which is to provide services to conflict-torn areas.

All Amore staff, some of them fresh graduates from Manila, are aware that joining the said institution brings along that risk of getting caught in the crossfire or getting harassed by the rebels.

### **The old fashion way**

The renewable energy project in Lam-alis started three years ago with the local government providing the area where Amore could begin its project.

Doctor said Lam-alis was chosen because of its strategic location and area profile besides passing the main project criteria, which is being a hotbed of rebel activities.

To be considered for the project, the Department of Energy has to certify that an

area is not included in the power grid projects of private and cooperative power plants for the next five years. Lam-alis fitted perfectly into the description.

In 2002, community organizers were sent to the area to do the feasibility studies.

Civil works for the construction of the mini-hydro plant began in January 2004 and it was finally "commissioned" in February this year.

The turbine, including the cost for civil works amounted to P6.5 million. It was all donated by Usaid.

Usaid likewise provided P320,000 for the construction and purchase of hardware for the agri-mill, which was completed also early this year.

For the potable water system, Amore was able to convince the British Embassy to fund the construction of the P1.14 project.

Finally, Amore was able to obtain computer from IBM-Eduquest, which costs about P250,000.

The local government of Columbio provided technical support and manpower to fast track the implementation of these projects.

The residents, in turn, were mobilized to provide the manual labor.

Today, LCREA has a management committee that looks into the maintenance of these existing projects. A committee is also tasked to collect "tariff" on power consumption.

Others have been assigned to a nursery for the community's reforestation project.

With the rate developments are sprucing up in Lam-alis, it could someday become a model community for comprehensive assistance programs and communal cooperation.

(September 26, 2005 issue)